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The Bitch Next Door



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Chapter 1 by Julian Darrows

Two times a day, like clockwork, Gabrielle rolls by this place with her music blaring the same nonsense music at 11 at night because she's a complete loon with no sense of common decency for those of us that work early in the morning. She then sits in her car to let her playlist finish for between 5 and 30 minutes, again because she's a loon, though by some providence she's learned to decrease the volume to mere ear-damaging levels rather than the initial Richter scale test she used to keep it at. That may or may not have something to do with the neighborhood's resident locksmith deciding to unlock her car and remove the radio entirely one night with a note that demanded she tone it down before she's forced to buy a new one while the remains of the one present were being scattered across a tidal basin. I'm not completely sure on that.

Gabrielle is a young woman for this area, a nearly static neighborhood tucked into the Deep South's few surviving suburban pockets that are somehow not coated with woods and bugs. Between a small college village in a less expensive part of town, a rapidly bloating metropolitan area a few miles north, and countless apartments scattered all over the western side populated with a dizzying array of clubs, bars, theaters, museums, restaurants, and all manner of places no one with hopes of living to retire with all their teeth should go, it's nothing short of odd that she's chosen a sleepy, nearly stagnant residential neighborhood to move to while she attends the local schooling arenas, especially given that her first impression screams to place her with the thousands of other adult hatchlings meandering the world with newly terrified eyes.

We met in a deceptively bland manner, given our mutual disdain for each other's very existence now being the most entertaining thing most of the neighbors have seen since sitcoms were a thing. On one of the few days in the summer that didn't place the temperature and humidity at

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to help her unload. The shuffling in the van made it clear she was struggling, grunts and curses flying out the back as if they were aimed at the stop sign that she'd nearly taken down on her arrival. As I rounded the corner to introduce myself, a beanbag chair flew from the van and made itself very acquainted with my face.

"Oh shit, sorry dude, I didn't know anyone was there. Are you alright?" Her concern at my near decapitation almost made me prematurely assume she might be a decent person.

"Ah, I'll be fine as soon as the birds stop chirpin'. Name's Julian, and I'll be the neighbor on your right. And you?" Never let it be said I'm not at least partially charming when introducing myself.

"I'm Gabrielle. Why'd you come over?" Somewhere between my mumbling about wanting to introduce myself and be a good neighbor I started reaching to help her unload the nearby chair. I was stopped very abruptly by her alarmingly fast foot stomping down inches ahead and a glare the likes of which I'd never seen and which was gone so fast I doubted it had actually been there at all. "No need, sir. I can handle the furniture." Though her face was still calm, her sharp brown eyes howled for me to reach for the chair again as a dare.

"Kay, I'll stand aside, just let me know if you'd like any help. So where 're you from?" I hadn't noticed how tight my throat got when her foot came down but my breath was nearly caught until she looked away.

"Depends on what you'd call home; where you're born, where you're raised, or where you felt the most like yourself." A swift lift and a toss of two more beanbags and a loosely packed bag of clothing marked each option as she continued to sort through the van. "Bright side is that for me the answers are all the same: Nowhere yet."

"Fair answer I guess. This place needs a mystery to solve. Well, why'd you move here? What's your goal?" A simple enough question to probe her thoughts.

"School, work, and escape from family is what I'm putting on my resume." She threw her braided black hair into a flare to move it from her face as she turned my way and looked right past me. The semi-staredown continued until she finally gestured for me to move over so that she could set the one remaining nightstand down. With a slight hop, she bounded from the van and landed beside me with the little table easily in hand. Setting it down on the curb she scampered back into the trailer for another piece. As she weighed the options of removing the desk against

moving the couch, pulled the door to the back of the van and let down the ramp that she apparently forgotten.

"What are you studying?" My curiosity got the best of me, something shed heard from wave after wave of young people that had moved to the city and upon which to walk her to his bed, reflexively caused her ears to twitch and tilted

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"Some of everything, really". As dismissive as possible, more than enough to deter the average horndog.

"Such as?"

"Social Sciences."

"Like Psychology and Statistics?" And then the filter jammed.

"No, like Sociology and Anthropology". From the look in her eyes, she wasn't quite used to anyone guessing so blatantly wrong.

"Ah well, I'll figure out what topics to not bring up at parties then, no need to trigger exam anxieties when you're not in class." She blinked a few times before going back to her pile of pillows. "Not to be insultin', but you know you may have an easier time of this if you moved the van a bit closer to your house, right?"

"Well, yeah I do... now." She cracked a small but cute smile as she sheepishly avoided eye contact. If not before, it was clear that she hadn't thought that far ahead into the move. Again she swung her hair over her shoulders before stumbling back out of the van, finally standing up in front of me. Up close I noticed a slight scent rise from her, akin to cinnamon and pine with a distinct undertone that took my mind down memory lane in a blurred whirl of pretty colors and greasy food.

"As a heads-up, if you're gonna smoke around here, be careful to do it in your backyard rather than on the porch or pretty much anywhere visible to Ms. Nettles in the house with the army of gnomes. Her son's an over-ambitious DEA hopeful and she'd love to help him get his first bust." I watched her breath catch for a second in the realization that I knew. "Calm down, I'm not concerned. Just figured you should be aware." Without waiting to see what else I could figure out by looking at her, she strolled over to the front of the van and began to pull it into her driveway. As she rolled all but one wheel over the curb and parked, I watched intently from a distance and after a few minutes decided to head back home.

"Thanks for the advice!" A shout from behind the van hit my ears as I walked back to my front door and noticed my cat staring out the window. Sel is a ball of manic energy that rarely holds still for long and on reflex, I snapped a picture of her parked on the sill with her tail flopping curiously off the edge. The smell of smoke then reached me and the memory of the burgers I'd

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from the wall beside me. Gabrielle had been watching from her fence as the grill shot it's voice of smokey dismay at me and had laughed hard enough to make herself momentarily hoarse. "Well, at least, we're off to a good start. Would you like one?" I said as I tossed a single, scorched disc of what used to be meat at her.

That was three years ago and, all things considered, she's made a lovely addition to the neighborhood. In conversation she's shown herself to be quite well read, quoting famous philosophers and authors at every turn when asked what she thinks about any subject. Her house is nicely kept amid a wild array of small flowers and plants she's begun growing in the most haphazard garden ever conceived, a spiral of loosely packed soil surrounding a glowing young forest of strange vegetable hybrids and what I will only refer to as mutant fruits such as the bright purple tomatoes and searing yellow carrots she's plucked up from what I must say has to be the most confused rabbit's nest in the world. Each winter as harvest season rolls in, we've all marveled at the sheer variety of colors sloshing about in her wheelbarrow, amazed that she not only intentionally made them happen, but was perfectly unconcerned with the effects eating them would have on her. The first winter she adopted the neighborhood's stray chicken and made it a small coop from a milk crate and pine straw which, for reasons no one is sure of, seems to have caused other chickens to randomly wander into the neighborhood. After an initial spike in the population of these clucking snacks, Sel's hunting excursions have knocked the numbers back down to a grand total of around 15. I am unsure whether this means there are only 15 chickens fast or strong enough to not become a new trophy for this feline assassin or if there are still more new ones coming to their perceived promised land only to find out it's been inhabited by a miniature panther with a perpetual hankering for poultry.

Around the beginning of this year, just before her fall break ended, Gabrielle threw a small party and invited friends over. These seven each invited three more. Those three invited 2. For those keeping score, that's 42 invited guests. Of this initial group, several invited more people to come after the party started, bringing the total to somewhere between 50 and a small army. Within this army were an assortment of college stereotypes, complete the standard issue frat boys and rival frat boys. Given that the nearby frats were populated by relatively well-financed

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the neighborhood in a drunken stupor that was nothing short of impressive, some of them even organizing themselves into a small platoon of torch wielding, alcohol soaked fireballs waiting to occur. This party lasted for an amazing 38 hours before the alcohol was finally all gone, the torches had burned out, the DJ finally broke his rhythm, and all the sweaty bodies in varying degrees of nudity at last dropped in exhaustion all over her home and many in the yard. As they each awakened one by one, gathering their clothes and other items to leave, I noticed several completely naked bodies strewn all over her empty garden. Among the pile was a patch of freshly dug soil that seemed to be moving of its own accord and drew my sight in curiosity. From this shallow grave emerged the happiest freshman in existence, painted a screaming blue and yellow, clad in a thong and tassels, with half his head shaved, one leg absolutely slathered in what I hoped against my own knowledge was pudding, and possibly missing a nipple. As he bounced his way to a nearby car, I feared for the safety of all on the road and the sanity of whichever poor law enforcement officer happened to pull this disaster-in-the-making over, but in a move that was just as stressing to the mind, he clambered into the trunk of the car, closed it most of the way, and pulled at the end of a hose in the back that had been taped to the side, presumably to prevent the capture of too much carbon monoxide to survive, but just enough to make the ride interesting. Of all the things that occurred at this festival of youthful chaos, little made less sense than Gabrielle herself, the only one still clothed and sober, as she calmly swept the driveway of the hundreds of empty cans and bottles surrounding her car and pulled it onto the street, then roamed up and down the street putting a letter in every mailbox but her own. When Gabrielle went back into her house, I watched as nearly every neighbor came out simultaneously to retrieve their letter. Following suit, I came to meet them all at the curbs and ask their take on the situation. Perhaps it was only me that wasn't surprised by the apparent apocalypse that occurred next door to me, as each person I spoke to shrugged off the party of the century as just a bunch of kids having too much fun. As I retreated back into my chair I opened the letter and out poured a handful of glitter, immediately turning my pants and seat into an admittedly cute beach of sparkles and shame, my instant thought being that it looked as if I'd received a lapdance from the most hilariously overzealous stripper of all time. With an exasperated breath, I opened the letter to read Gabrielle's rather cordial and overtly

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forget the time you set my bushes on fire with your 4th of July celebration involving the destructive power of a mortar and roman candle combination "minigun" which made one of my chickens into the first of it's kind to have war flashbacks. I'm writing this letter, first and foremost, to apologize for the party at my house that got well out of hand within the first hour and stayed just this side of a riot for the following day and a half. I would explain that I only invited seven people, each of whom left before around 3 am the first night and left me with a Viking village to deal with, but I'm sure such would be irrelevant as the number of people currently sleeping on my couches is enough to make me consider simply setting the house on fire and starting over. I am also writing you to propose a truce to our ongoing hostilities, as I've decided that I may settle down here after all rather than leaving when I graduate. I am also prepared to offer a counter in case you are not in agreement with this idea, one in which I'm sure our differences will be beneficial.

As you will likely have noticed, your letter contained a fistful of glitter. Consider it an invitation to a prank war in which the first person to surrender must move out within the following 3 months. We can meet to talk out terms and conditions, have a notary make it official and begin our campaign against each others' sanity at your convenience.

I look forward to your response.

-Gabrielle"

And that is why I'm currently sitting in this chair, handcuffed left arm to right ankle, wearing a kilt, and with the sound of smooth jazz playing through the sound system in my living room. Because this woman is a loon. Creative and quite clever, but a loon nonetheless.

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